

# Three sisters by anton chekhov



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The play 'Three Sisters' by Anton Chekhov takes place over a several year period in a small Russian provincial town at the turn of the twentieth century. Chekhov is recognised as a playwright who had similar ideas about naturalistic theatre as Stanislavski did. This is realised in 'Three Sisters' by the fact that there is no definite plot line. This emphasises the naturalism because it shows real life with no distinct climax to the play and an idea of their lives continuing. The three Prozorov sisters live a dull existence and are forever dreaming of their former home in Moscow and are forever hopeful of their return to their charming, motivating and significant existence there, in comparison to their dissatisfaction with their lives when the play is set.

This is a continuing theme throughout the entire play. Many characters comment on the idea that life is better somewhere other than where they are, particularly the sisters who desperately want to get to Moscow. But as Chebutykin voiced, wherever they were, somewhere else would be better. The company the family keep with the officers and soldiers from a nearby military post diverts the family from their Moscow dream.

Act one, set in the Prozorov's house, is an introduction to all the characters and relationships between them. Olga, the oldest sister (aged twenty-eight) and a high school teacher seems quite troubled at the beginning of the play. She immediately introduces the main theme of the play, in that they are all "longing" for a better life in Moscow. The play is almost driven by the decline of the characters into misery and unhappiness. Act one is Irina's 'name-day'.

She is the youngest sister, aged twenty, and she seems hopeful and excited. Masha is unhappily married to a teacher called Kulygin, who works at the

same school as Olga. Andrey, the brother, is introduced as being in love and has aspirations of becoming a professor at Moscow University. Baron Tusenbach introduces a theme relevant to Russia at the time the play was set.

He talks of “ A great healthy storm... brewing” for a change in Russian society. This is relevant because the revolution in Russia was nearing and so it was perhaps a general feeling in Russia at the time that something had to change, as this play was written before the revolution actually occurred.

A world hemmed in by routine and boredom is only provided with excitement by arrivals and departures during the play. The first arrival that causes a great stir in the Prozorov household is the arrival of battery commander, Vershinin. He arrives from Moscow and was an old friend of the three sisters' father. They are all very eager to all and catch up with this new arrival.

The arrival of Natasha, the woman Andrey loves, shows again that excitement or action only comes into the play through arrivals, or departures, of a character. This highlights the boredom that only this can create enthusiasm. All of the sisters appear to look down on Natasha because she is lower status/ class than them, and they mock her. This causes her to run out showing her feeble nature, but as Andrey runs after her, you realise how deeply he loves her. Act two is set at about 8 o' clock and it is some years later than act one, which is realised by the fact that Natasha has a child. Immediately we notice a change in character in Natasha.

She is more confident, bossy and inquisitive. It appears she is only worried about her baby, Bobik. Andrey seems constantly irritated with her. All of this is shown in the opening sequence, or unit, where Natasha goes to talk to Andrey.

This is supposedly to check all candles are out at night time, when in fact it is to see Andrey's views about her ideas for the house. These are things such as moving Bobik into Irina's room and making her stay with Olga and not having the mummies come to perform. Andrey seems quite dejected and fed up with Natasha. Also, his hopes of being a college professor seem to be thwarted and he is now merely a secretary of the local Executive Council. The further decline in Andrey is commented on; he is gambling. Masha is seen to be further resentful of her marriage, and has started a love affair with Vershinin.

When Vershinin and Masha are talking, the phrase "fed up" is repeated in different contexts to the people they are talking about, but it underlines the feeling the play creates, of tedium and agitation. Masha is constantly giggling due to her loves for Vershinin. Others notice this in her but she dismisses it to them. However, her happy mood changes when Vershinin receives a letter from his daughter about his suicidal wife and has to leave. Masha is resentful and her temper flares.

It is obvious she is jealous of Vershinin's wife and frustrated that she cannot be with the man she loves. When Tusenbach and Irina enter, it is realised that Tusenbach is attracted to Irina. Later on, we realise that Solyony is also attracted to Irina. However, Irina rejects them both, and this is perhaps

because she has other suitors in mind and is looking for her one true love. Tusenbach also introduces another theme of the play of their reflection on life after them and how they will be forgotten with a gradual change (Russian revolution), but it will create a better life for others. Natasha has told the family that the mummies, who were to be the night's entertainment, are not to come because Bobik is ill.

This irritates the sisters greatly, but they have to give in and everyone goes back to their own homes. She has prevented everyone from having his or her fun. However, Protopopov arrives to take Natasha out with him and she does not decline. This is quite hypocritical, but it is speculated that she is perhaps having an affair with this leader of the local council. Act three is set in the middle of the night in Olga, and now also Irina's room.

There is a fire in the town, which causes great distress for the people in it. Relationships between the characters have developed such as the love affair between Masha and Vershinin has grown, and Natasha and Protopopov. Irina comments on how the " whole town is talking [and]..

. laughing" at Andrey for being cheated on by his wife and the man who runs the place he works. Natasha harshly criticises Anfisa, the nanny, and comments on her low, peasantry status, ignoring her own lower class background. She now orders people about and practically runs the household her way. Her character has vastly changed from the shy, feeble Natasha she was in the first act, to a confident and domineering character.

She has had another child, Sofoshka, showing time passing again. Andrey has declined further into debt and depression. It is realised that he has

mortgaged the three sisters house to feed his gambling problem and during a confrontation with his sisters, Andrey defends Natasha to them, which is unexpected, but perhaps he is defending his pride more than Natasha. He also stands up for his career that he knows is not as high as his ambitions were, but tries to make himself seem respected in the same way. Finally he confesses his debt and mortgaging of the house and admits he had a problem with gambling, but has now stopped. This is quite surprising, but when he breaks down, you can't help but feel sympathy for him.

Irina is also suffering. Her dream of work is now one where she wants to give up and she resigns to marrying the Baron Tusenbach, because she feels they will never get to Moscow to fulfil her dreams. Masha confesses all about her love affair with Vershinin to her sisters, but decides to keep it quiet and let it bubble up inside her. In this act resentment is building amongst the characters and the changing ways stresses the decline in the characters hope and excitement. Frustration is turning in to resignation to the fact that their dream will not be fulfilled.

The act ends with the knowledge of the local military brigade leaving. All characters seem dejected. In act four, soldiers are leaving the town. All hope is lost amongst the characters.

When Vershinin leaves, Masha breaks down. We realise how much she loves him and now how miserable she will be. We become conscious of the fact that Kulygin knew her love for Vershinin all along, but because of his love for her he just let it go. Olga is now the school headmistress and lives there permanently with Anfisa. This has left Irina at home in the house as Masha

lives with Kulygin and Olga has moved out. She has resigned herself to marrying the Baron Tusenbach and is just letting life go on and leaving her life in the hands of fate.

However, the Baron is challenged to a duel with Solyony, who is jealous that he is going to marry Irina. Solyony defeats Tusenbach and Irina is left on her own again. This seems like it would be a climax within the play, but not much emphasis is placed on this duel and the impression that life goes on is left with the audience. Chebutykin is also moving on to serve his last year as doctor of the army.

He gives advice to Andrey to move on and leave behind his troubles with Natasha and the house. This idea is left open as to whether he takes this idea on board, but the last image is of him with his baby, so perhaps he is so attached, he does not let go. I think this is one of the purposes to Chekhov's style that the characters lives continue after the play. As the regiments move on and as the birds fly south for the winter, this significant image shows the want of the characters to move on, and for a better life. The play seems like the lives within it are not finished with the play, but have a purpose beyond it.